



DISCUSSION NOTE

REPLY TO BENATAR

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Reply to Benatar

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DAVID BENATAR ARGUES THAT EXISTENCE is always a harm (Benatar 2006). Previously, I presented two objections to his argument (Brown 2011). Benatar has replied to one of these objections (Benatar 2013). In this brief note, I reply to his reply.

My objection centered on an example involving three possible worlds – A, B and C – and one person, Jemima: “in A, Jemima does not exist; in B, Jemima exists but experiences neither pleasure nor pain; and in C, Jemima exists and experiences only pleasure” (Brown 2011: 47). The question was how to rank these worlds from the perspective of Jemima’s good. I pointed out that Benatar’s view – as I understood it – implied the following dubious answer: C is better than B, and both of these worlds are equally as good as A.

Benatar has helpfully clarified that this was a misunderstanding (Benatar 2013: 139-40). In particular, he says, his view does not imply that A and B are equally good; rather, it implies that A is better than B.¹ Fair enough.

My argument is easily recovered, however, by a simple modification of the example: in A, Jemima does not exist (as before); in B*, Jemima exists and experiences *some pleasure* and no pain; in C*, Jemima exists and experiences *more pleasure* and no pain.² Now Benatar’s view surely does entail that C* and B* are both equally as good as A. This follows directly from Benatar’s explicit statement that a life containing only good and no bad “is neither a harm nor a benefit and we should be indifferent between such an existence and never existing” (Benatar 2006: 29). Yet Benatar’s view, as I understand it, also implies that C* is better than B* (and if it does not, then that is bad enough). Thus, about *this* example, Benatar’s view yields a verdict just as dubious as the one stated above.

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References

- Benatar, D. (2013) “Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics,” *Journal of Ethics* 17(1-2): 121-51.
—— (2006) *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Brown, C. (2011) “Better Never to Have Been Believed: Benatar on the Harm of Existence,” *Economics and Philosophy* 27(1): 45-52.

¹ A little confusingly, what Benatar actually wrote is “A is worse.” But the surrounding discussion makes clear that he has simply muddled the names of the worlds, and by “A” he really means B.

² This modification was suggested in my earlier paper (Brown 2011: 47, n. 6).